DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 157 343 EC 111 834

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TITLE Creative Movement for Retarded Children.
PUB DATE Jun 78
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the World Congress on Future Special Educaion (First, Stirling, Scotland, June 25 - July 1, 1978)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adolescents; Childhood; *Creative Expression; *Dance; Mentally Handicapped; *Program Descriptions; *Trainable Mentally Handicapped

ABSTRACT

The paper discusses creative movement and dance for retarded children and describes a summer movement and dance program for 20 trainable mentally retarded children (7 to 17 years old). The program's central goal is increasing each child's capacity for creative expression. Among results were an increased ability in rhythm. (Author/SBH)

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JUL 3 1 1978

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CREATIVE MOVEMENT FOR RETARDED CHILDREN

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Program

This summer program for trainable mentally retarded (TMR) children had movement and dance as a base, and integrated the visual arts, stories, and music. The 20 children aged 7 to 17 (and one adult aged 33) came from a special center and from public school TMR classes. They participated for 8 weeks (16 classes), at a community dance studio. The 5 teachers were dancers, artists, and musicians, all of whom had previous experience with children. The two hour time period began with everyone together for dance activities, begining with a warm up, then progressing from sitting, to standing, and finally to moving across the floor. The class was then divided in 2 groups each having a turn for art in one room and music in another. After a snack, they sat together for movement and rhythm activities to complete the morning. Themes were used to link dance, art, and music projects; the first theme was body awareness, another was sizes of space. As the main emphasis of the program was movement and dance, and because there has been more exploration of the visual arts and music with retarded children, we have chosen to concentrate our discussion on movement and dance, and on creativity in general.

Values

Movement and dance are of value not only for general physical development, but more particularly as a basic learning tool. It is learning through direct physical interaction with one's environment. Likewise, movement expresses and communicates one's feelings in their purest form. When movement evolves into dance it's creative and social value become apparent. Each child is now

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creating his own statement, a satisfaction in itself, and a message to others. Unlike the visual arts and music, dance has neither a finished product nor a volume of scores to reproduce. Dance exists only in the moment and because others see it and are affected by it. This social necessity requires the development of a group feeling and beyond that the more advanced social skills used in working with a partner or in larger groups. The forming of a meaningful group gives a strong, underlying support to the social unit of the class within the school structure.

Creative movement offers the children a successful way to experience and practice risk-taking in terms of showing their feelings and ideas, trying new movements, and by working through their limitations, all in the presence of others. Creativity, as an open-ended process fosters success and avoids failure situations. It also helps children to think in terms of several solutions, rather than a single right answer. Both of these are in contrast to skill-oriented training. In these ways the children gain flexibility and self-confidence in meeting new situations.

The possibilities for carry-over to cognitive skills seem strongest in the areas of arithmetic and language. The children have experiences in counting, sequencing, following 2 and 3 step directions, and thinking about shapes. Dance enhances their communication skills by developing appropriate body language, deepening their understanding of such abstract words as shape, design, feeling, and line; and increasing their pleasure in successful communication and self-expression. The emphasis on rhythm helps the children's speech directly by demonstrating to them the cadence and phrasing of words and sentences.

Goals

The central goal of our program was to increase each child's capacity for creative expression. The careful choosing of open-ended, stimulating activities and the teachers' flexible interpretation of those activities, along with an atmosphere of trust and encouragement, combined to give each child the freedom necessary for creative expression. The raw material for this expression comes from a composite of the child's life experiences including his strengths, problems, and general development in cognitive, sensorimotor, and social areas. Accordingly, we viewed retardation not only in terms of the limitations it imposes but also as a source of feelings and opinions he may want to express.

Related sub-goals were also important. They included improved body image, improved social communication, increased range of movement and motor organization, increased awareness of self in space and in relation to others, and increased tactile sensitivity, as well as a pleasureable experience.

Curriculum and Techniques

The challenge of this program was to develop curriculum and teaching techniques appropriate to a retarded child's level of functioning but effective in freeing his creative potential. Some of the characteristics of retarded children that required special consideration were lack of coordination, short attention span, low energy level, limited cognitive ability, and poor social skills. An underlying approach in working with retarded children is to expand each idea both vertically to a more abstract level and horizontally to include all possible variations on a given theme. This repetition helped us not only to teach concepts but more importantly, each variation increased the children's movement and art vocabulary.

One technique was to isolate the essential creative components of each activity and then find ways to structure the extraneous elements thus conserving

the child's available resources. An established routine simplified transitions and decreased the number of verbal explanations necessary. A carpet mat for each child organized the space visually. In combination with verbal instructions these mats enabled the children to easily make a circle, move to the edges or middle of the room, or jump from one place to another. Within dance activities we used strong, compelling rhythms to structure each movement. A sudden instruction to "freeze" refocused wandering attention or punctuated a series of movements. Transitions from one dance activity to another were eliminated by making the transition part of the activity itself. For example, to make a circle from a small group we joined hands and "blew up the balloon". To move to the edges of the room the mats were preplaced and the children were challenged to find their mats by rolling, jumping, sliding, etc.

Curriculum topics were planned to progress vertically from concrete experiences to more abstract applications of the concepts to be learned. In order to develop a larger, more expressive movement range, we began by working with each body part separately in a simple rhythmic movement. We then added direction, asking the children to find a "high place for their hand" or "a low place for their shoulders". Pairs of children then made "a high bridge with their legs". As a later development each child was asked to join in, one by one, to form a machine. Each found a way to attach himself to the growing group of children. When complete the machine was turned on and the children moved in a style and rhythm appropriate to, for example, a typewriter or a spaghetti machine.

To explore the space of the room we began in art by decorating large, odd shaped furniture boxes. We then experimented with different ways of going around, through, and in and out of them. Later we made an "obstacle

course" using all the boxes. The children experienced the space alone, with a partner, and in a "follow the leader line". Squeezing hands helped focus their attention on the connection from child to child and helped to create the awareness of another person's movements. Finally the children demonstrated for each other how they would look of they pretended to be in a tiny box, a long skinny box, etc. Feelings of freedom and confinement began to be imagined.

From the instruction to "freeze" a simple dance was built. Each child was asked to choose a movement either inspired by or directly from their expanding movement vocabulary. Then the group joined in copying their movement three times in the accented rhythm "1-2-3-freeze!" that had also been used to structure earlier activities.

To learn new skills much repetition was needed. Each concept such as "wide and thin" was varied horizontally to keep the excitement and interest high. Wide and thin was performed with arms, legs, fingers, mouth, elbows; slow, fast, loud, soft; standing, sitting, lying down, moving; smooth, sharp; alone, in groups; sad, happy, angry, proud, silly, etc. Thus the concept wide and thin was learned empirically through repeated experience of the one unchanging factor. In addition, the richness of the concept wide and thin slowly became apparent when the children created a thin body position to show sadness or a wide position to show exuberance. Two children might create a thin shape together to show friendship.

Three related techniques that increased participation were: mirroring, adapting the activity to incorporate random behavior in an appropriate way, and stimulating the children to make contributions of their own. For example, if a child were asked to make a shape but did not understand the request or did not want to participate, the teacher mirrored the child's body positon and this "shape" became a part of the activity. The mirrored child benefitted by

a concrete demonstration of the value that the teacher placed on his individuality and an increased self awareness from seeing his position mirrored by the class. Many of the children became interested in something that was not part of the teacher's plan. Through incorporation of these behaviors, we had unsolicited sound accompaniments, tours of the dance studio initiated by a wandering child, and audiences which began by refusals to participate. Finally, the children were encouraged to make suggestions of their own. Some children became interested in clapping the rhythms of words. Those rhythms were then used to structure new activities. Others liked to tell about their feelings and experiences and these were used to interpret a movement series.

A last technique needed to sustain interest was careful pacing. From a strenuous activity the children became tired before the teacher felt that the activity should end. The opposite was also true, the children became restless before a quiet activity was completed. Therefore, the teachers responded quickly to these cues with a change of pace but not necessarily a change of subject matter. Curvy lines can move delicately through the fingers and wrists or broadly through the whole body. When necessary high energy movements can be done from more contained positions: lying down the children swam away from sharks and did "curl up and stretch out" to a vigorous beat.

General Results

The most dramatic progress was the children's increased ability with rhythm. Where none could copy two claps on the first day, by the last day most could both copy and create more complex rhythms. Their ability to move with others, holding hands, or otherwise using the same space clearly increased. A growth in self-confidence in movement was evident as they began to create their own movements. The children worked intently on their visual arts projects and evidenced creativity in this sphere as well.

Initially, positive indications came from parents and the children's other

teachers. This enthusiasm was substantiated at the end of the program by diligent and successful work on the part of program directors to find new funds to continue with creative movement as a regular part of the program.

Future Development

For future development several areas are of interest. Daily reporting procedures for monitoring the child's progress, as well as pre and post evaluation techniques would help to quickly note areas of strength. However, the inherent difficulty is in subverting the emphasis on creativity to a focus on specific skill gains.

Curriculum and program development should move to include children with handicaps other then retardation, adult groups, and groups of normal and handicapped children together. Drama as an adjunct to dance has considerable potential for curriculum enrichment. Ultimately, the program should be developed in coordination with the public school programs and curriculum. We see this type of support as a long-term goal in recognition of the merit and viability of movement and dance as appropriate to the education of children with special needs.

Acknowledgements

The authors express appreciation to Evelyn Phillips Heimlich, Research Associate, Children's Service, New York State Psychiatric Institute, New York City for her ideas and support in developing this program. This program was jointly supported by grants from: The North Carolina Arts Council and The National Endowment for the Arts in Washington, D. C., a federal agency; The Durham Arts Council; Civitan of Durham; and Sara Barker Circle of the King's Daughters, Durham, North Carolina.